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# Gender Differences in the Workplace: Reviewing the Past and Looking to the Future

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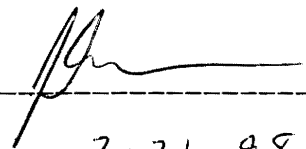
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**Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM  
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL**

Name: Stephanie Powell  
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Faculty Mentor: Dr. John Haas  
PROJECT TITLE: Gender Differences in the Workplace:  
Reviewing the Past and Looking to the Future

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed:  John W Haas, Faculty Mentor  
Date: 3-31-98 4-2090

Comments (Optional):

Gender Differences in the Workplace: Reviewing the Past and  
Looking to the Future

Stephanie Powell

Senior Honors Project

Dr. John Haas, Faculty Mentor

March 27, 1998

## Gender Differences in the Workplace: Reviewing the Past and Looking to the Future

### Introduction

The study of differences between males and females has been researched for a long time, and many stereotypes about both genders have developed. Since the desegregation of the workforce, these once commonly accepted stereotypes are being strongly questioned in the work environment. Although a relatively young field, the study of gender differences and the workplace is gaining more attention with each passing year. Many factors have contributed to the popularity that this field of research has obtained. One seems to be the lack of the development of concrete generalizations about the two genders together in the workforce, and the various contradictions that can be found across studies is another factor. Perhaps the main factor is simply the obvious increase in the number of females in the workforce.

Women have been breaking in to the working world since the early colonial days, but they were very limited in the jobs that they could hold. The line between "women's work" and "men's work" was distinctly drawn. Throughout history, women have slowly but surely worked their way into the

workforce only to find a glass ceiling that they could not break through. Low-level positions were where their place was. A high-level managerial position was beyond their reach. In the last twenty to thirty years, working women have finally begun to get closer to achieving equality working men. The once out-of-reach positions are sometimes being grasped. Occupational desegregation was marked in the 1970s due to the increase in the number of females enrolled in higher education and professional schools, the enactment of laws that prohibited sex discrimination, the advances of the women's movement, and the reduction of gender stereotyping in both employment and education. This has led to an ever-increasing number of working women, which has opened up to a varied and abundant field of study involving the role of gender in the workplace.

### **Statement of Problem and Purpose Statement**

The general obvious question that researchers in the field are trying to answer is: are men and women really that different in the work environment? If so, are these differences negative and how can they be overcome. After doing some research on the study of gender differences in the workplace, several questions and concerns have surfaced. The purpose of this project is to study the research done on

gender and the workplace over the last twenty years. This study will compare and contrast the evolvement of the field while developing recommendations for future research. The outcome of this study is important because there are very few individuals that will not be employed and have to deal with the interaction of males and females in the workplace. The effects of gender and the workplace are far reaching. They effect a majority of the United States population everyday.

### **Review of Literature**

This study is based on a critical literature review. The time span ranges from 1977 to 1997. This time frame was chosen because the literature that was studied fell into this time. Also, very little research was done on gender differences and the workplace before the late 1970s for the very reasons that were previously stated [enactment of sex discrimination laws, advances of the women's movement, etc.]. The articles studied also deal with the United States workforce only. The focus of the studies are also on males and females as a whole and not on specific ethnic groups, such as African-American women or Japanese men. This is a study on gender, not cultural differences. However, together gender and ethnicity are creating a more

diverse workforce than has been seen in the past. Studies on workplace diversity are definitely relevant to the study of gender differences but are not considered in this project.

The various articles were studied and divided into two different time periods. The first is from 1977 through 1985. The latter starts in 1986 and continues until the present. There is not a definite line drawn between these two time periods, but this seems to be a fairly adequate division. Each time frame will be studied separately. The two will then be compared and contrasted. From these comparisons, recommendations for will be formed for the possible improvement and advancement of future research.

### **Research on Gender Differences and the Workplace**

#### **(1977-1985)**

The field is just beginning to take shape during this time. It is easy to see through the articles and the research that as the field is forming it is greatly influenced by the popular ideas of society. From the data that was collected for this study, it seems that most of the research during this time period revolves around three different categories or themes (Freedman and Philips 232-233). The first encompasses the descriptive economic angles

of being a working woman. This study found a few examples of this theme.

One is a study by Charles N. Halaby from the University of Wisconsin, Madison entitled "Sexual Inequality in the Workplace: An Employer-Specific Analysis of Pay Difference." Halaby starts with the widely accepted idea that men make more than women and then proceeds to try to find out why by testing two dominant theories of inequality- wage discrimination hypothesis and the crowding hypothesis. Ultimately, he found that the major source of inequality was "job and rank segregation along sexual lines" (Halaby 101). He also expresses concern at his inability to find out why women are disadvantaged and hints at his belief that employers some employers seem to have a taste for discrimination (Halaby 103).



A second example is a study done by Randall K. Filer called "Male-Female Wage Differences: The Importance of Compensating Differentials." His research investigated "the extent to which differences in average earnings between men and women may be the result of sorting by the sexes into jobs with different average levels of disagreeable and agreeable working conditions" (Filer 426). The study resulted in finding that significant differences were evident between the working conditions typical of jobs held by women and jobs held by men. The differences in working conditions suggests that there seems to be a need to pay higher wages in order to attract employees to the jobs held by men. Filer believes that this explains the significant difference in average earnings for men and women.

A second research theme, also discussed in a study by Sara M. Freedman and James S. Phillips from the University of Houston titled "The Changing Nature of Research on Women at Work", is the use of models to explain the presence or absence of sex and gender differences in organizational behavior. Topics placed under this heading include studies on gender stereotypes, development and effects of sex role identities, and the effect of the social learning process on males and females. My research found examples of this second theme as well. One such article was found in the

Fall 1981 edition of National Forum. The article "Socialization and Women at Work" discusses how early socialization has created obstacles that are difficult to overcome and disadvantaged women. "The reality of the male-structured workplace is that the values associated with female socialization must be put aside" (Marciano 24). One value paradox that the author discusses is the "team" concept. The belief is that men learn teamwork and the importance of achieving "victor" status through experiences in childhood sports. "Given the relatively recent admission to and expansion of women's team sports, men are far more likely to have had team experience from an early age, and on a more continuous basis" (Marciano 24). Marciano found that socialization did have a large impact on women moving into the male-established workforce.

The final theme that runs through the 1977-1985 research is the uncovering of new perspectives due to changes in prevailing societal values, legal requirements, and increase of women in the workforce. "Many topics not even considered just a few short years ago have become critical areas in need of creative exploration" (Freedman 233). One such topic dealt with sexual harassment and the workplace. This stems from the increasing amount of attention that the once taboo subject of sexual harassment

is receiving. It was in 1978 that the Working Women United Institute formally defined sexual harassment as "any repeated or unwarranted verbal or physical sexual advances, sexually explicit derogatory statements, or sexually discriminatory remarks made by someone in the workplace which is offensive and objectionable to the recipient or which causes the recipient discomfort or humiliation or which interferes with recipient's job performance" (Gruber 273). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) published its final guidelines on sexual harassment in November of 1980. This attention was opening the subject up for discussion and making it an important part of gender differences and the workplace issue. Through the research done for this project, sexual harassment in the workplace was the topic most often studied during this period of 8 years. A 1978 article "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Historical Notes" traces the history of sexual harassment at work in the United States as far back as the colonial days (Bularzik 28). The author provides evidence of many encounters that have taken place throughout history. She feels that sexual harassment occurs because "the license to harass women workers, which many feel that they have, stems from notions that there is a "woman's place" which women in the labor force have left, thus leaving behind their

personal integrity" (26).

The three articles reviewed in this study were published in 1978, 1982, and 1984. All three share many commonalties. They all support the idea that sexual harassment is not about sexual desire, but instead about the inappropriate use of power and control over another person. Discussions on the types of sexual harassment, targets of sexual harassment, and responses to sexual harassment are found in all three articles. Most of the articles view this as a "men against women" problem. The percentage of women in each of these studies that had been sexually harassed was generally fairly high (ranging from 36% to 50%). Females also saw this as a significantly more serious problem than males. With a brief overview and discussion of the research on gender differences and the workplace from 1977 to 1985, it is time to study the research that has been done from 1986 to the present.

### **Research on Gender Differences and the Workplace**

**(1986-1998)**

Over the past decade, the study of gender differences and the workplace has gained widespread attention. There seem to be no limitations on the type of research that can be done. Studies have addressed almost every variable

imaginable to determine what, if any differences among the genders exist. The recurring research themes that appeared in the first time period that was studied continue to be of interest to researchers, but so much more has entered the field. The critical issues theme has found many new topics. A few of the topics that have received more attention deal with women and stress, the power struggle between men and women in the workplace, the relationship between work and family, organizational romances, the effects of the advancement of technology on women in the workplace, conflict management, differences in the way males and females make ethical (or unethical) decisions. Sexual harassment continues to be the subject of a good amount of research. A sample of studies published during this time period will now be reviewed.

In an article in Training magazine, Bob Filipczak discusses the effect the ongoing campaign against sexual harassment in the workplace has had on gender communication in the workplace. In short, his research has led him to believe that it has very negatively effected gender communication which has in turn decreased the chances of understanding the differences in male and female communication styles. For example, male supervisors may feel that they cannot bring a female subordinate into their

office and shut the door to hold a private meeting without being misperceived, or that they have to watch everything they say around a co-worker of the opposite sex. Many males feel as if they are walking in eggshells when they have to communicate with a female. This has potentially very negative long-term effects on some advances that may have been made in the understanding of communication between males and females. Filipczak does have an idea about educating men and women about their differences. "We could pretend it doesn't exist and continue to flounder in confused workplaces where signals get crossed and misunderstandings are common... perhaps, we could build climates of understanding where we can adapt to the differences and get on with our work" (30).

The next article is from a study by Marshall Schminke titled "Gender Differences in Ethical Frameworks and Evaluation of Others' Choices in Ethical Dilemmas." The study strives to examine the relationship between gender and ethical decision models used by managers. Previous research on this topic has not yielded conclusive results as to whether there are differences and if they are negative. Schminke found through his research that men and women use very similar ethical models, but gender played a difference in the response to the ethical dilemmas of others. Women

are harsher on women than men, and men are harsher on men than women. However, Schminke stresses the fact that his research is exploratory and should be treated as such. "In all, whether men and women managers share equal managerial skills and ethical orientations is not really the critical point. What matters is understanding any differences that do exist and achieving symmetric perceptions of the ways each approaches the business environment" (62-64).

A third article to examine deals with women and technology. Judy Wajcman researches the relationship between working females and advancing technology. She states that this is a negative relationship. "[Her] argument is that male power is also embodied in the design of technology. Technology is made by men to make full use of their physical advantage and technical competence. The workplace culture based on technical skill, which expresses and consolidates relations among men, is an important factor in explaining the continuing exclusion of women from skilled work" (29-30). The article covers the issues of defining what it means to "be skilled", discussing how women have been "deskilled", and trying to determine whether advancing technology is opening up more to females. Wajcman ends up concluding that skills are socially not technically determined and defined to give "priority to traditionally

accepted 'male' work" (43). She advocates that there is a need to challenge the way that technology has kept women into inferior job position (44).

The final work that will be analyzed deals with the genders and conflict in the workplace. In this article, Sybil Evans discusses ways that conflict in the workplace can be positive. She is studying conflict as it relates to discrimination, and she discusses how conflict resolution can keep matters out of the courts. When employees feel that barriers have been set up to keep them or others from advancing, the result is often low morale and the underutilization of employees. If employers can treat or address any perceptions of discrimination before they get out of hand, employers and employees will be better off in the long run. This is where conflict resolution steps in. Through interpersonal negotiation or mediation, conflicts can be resolved or at least managed constructively. Companies are beginning to look at conflict in these terms as stated by Michael Starr "'It's either pay now or pay later. Pay now to train supervisors in people skills to resolve conflicts as a preventative measure or pay later for costly discrimination suits- the first is far cheaper'" (Evans 50). Conflict resolution has been found to be a great way to deal with gender conflicts that may arise



within the working environment.

**Similarities Found in the Studies of Gender Differences in  
the Workplace from 1977-1985 and 1986-1997**

One of the main similarities between the two time periods of study is the focus on most of the studies or articles. Large majorities of research, especially in the earlier studies, emphasize the effect that workplace gender differences have on women. This makes sense when looked at from the standpoint that it was the females who entered the already established predominantly male workforce. On the other hand, males have to adapt to the new integrated work environment. It is unfair to do continuous research on how women have been unfairly treated without doing research on how to help males cope with the new and necessary changes. Glenn Rifken of the Harvard Business Review points out this oversight in his editorial "Workplace Diversity: The Forgotten White Male." "As diversity has become a hot topic in corporate management, virtually all research has focused on how such demographic change would affect the women and minorities themselves, while scant attention has been paid to the traditional majority. 'The success of any diversity effort depends on acceptance by the majority' [Charles]

O'Reilly (of Stanford Business School) says" (8). Rifkin goes on to say how the little research that has been done has found white males to have become less committed and attached to their workplace, have increased absenteeism, and are less comfortable than they have ever felt before. This similarity is not exactly a positive for the research that has been done.

Several of the topics have remained the same over the course of gender difference studies. The topic that probably stands out from the rest is sexual harassment. It has continued to be a hot topic in the news and media. New laws and rulings have also contributed to its abundance of attention. The research that has been done has also produced surprisingly similar findings. The motive for sexual harassment has been pretty much the same- power over another person. The types of sexual harassment, the responses, and the consequences have remained consistent. Men have continued to view this as a less serious issue than women do.

The methods of collecting data have changed relatively little. This is not surprising since the methods of collecting data are universal no matter what type of research is being done. A questionnaire or survey seems to be the most popular method of collecting data. It takes a

lot less time than doing personal interviews, and it can be administered to a very large sample. Some researchers also use telephone interviews or personal interviews. Business students are used fairly often for collecting data. They seem to be an easy, readily available sample to use that is inexpensive.

### **Differences Found in the Studies of Gender Differences in the Workplace from 1977-1985 and 1986-1997**

The main difference that appears when contrasting the two time periods of study is number of articles published. An example of this can be seen when consulting the Communication Abstracts to find research articles on gender differences in the workforce. When looking under the heading of "gender", one would find zero articles listed in 1978. Under the same heading, there were eight articles listed in 1988. By the end of 1997, there were nearly one hundred articles published. This seems to be concrete evidence of the growth within the field, as well as an indication that the great expansion of study in this area has been over the course of the past twenty years. Obviously, development of this sort would change the study that takes place within a field.

Another difference is the diversity of literature and

research that is now a part of the field. As more women have moved into the working world and been named to higher and higher positions, new studies have become necessary. It is no longer adequate to focus primarily on wage differences and sexual harassment. Technology has also added a new dimension to the workforce and to this field of research. Questions have arisen concerning whether technology affects men and women in the same way. This was not an issue twenty years ago.

Even though the focus of research done on gender issues remains more female-oriented, there have been more studies done concentrating on the male gender in the past five to ten years than there were before. This shows that researchers have realized that females are not the only ones who are having to make changes due to the integration of the workforce.

This next difference may have surfaced because of the articles that I found and reviewed, it seems that more personal interviews were a part of research in this field during the early years of study. This may not be accurate. It just seems as if now many more studies are done through filled out questionnaires, while it seems to be the reverse for the beginning years of study. Again, this difference may be related to the articles that I reviewed and not the

field as a whole.

### **Recommendations for Future Research in the Field of Gender Differences in the Workplace**

Through the research that has been done, some recommendations have been developed that would seem to improve the validity of the findings of the studies that are done. Perhaps, these suggestions might aid in coming up with some concrete answers to the questions that have been asked about gender differences in the workplace. Thus far, I do not feel that there have been very many conclusive findings. I also think that several improvements can be made. There are four main ideas that I would like to focus on.

First, more research needs to be done using individuals who are actually in the workforce. This means less research on college students. Many of the studies that were reviewed determined results by surveying college, particularly business students. This brings up the question of how much college students really know about the "real world." I would wager that it is a lot less than they think they know. Nothing is a greater teacher than experience. If research was being done on a specific male or female trait difference, a study involving students might prove to be

adequate as well as accurate. Realistically speaking, people who are a part of the working world are going to have the experiences necessary to give more valid as well as more valuable responses than those who will join the workforce sometime in the future. Nothing can replace the knowledge gained through full-time work experience. While college students are often cheap subjects, they are not really worth the money that they save. Useful, applicable results are more important in the long run.

Second, I am concerned with the methods of testing. I came across a minimal number of studies that involved the actual observation of the interaction of men and women in the workplace. A questionnaire or survey can be filled out as accurately and honestly as possible, but nothing can take the place of observations or face-to-face interaction. A majority of the literature that was reviewed for this project was done by filling out surveys or questionnaires. I found myself questioning the validity of the conclusions that were drawn. More in-person research would strengthen the results. I found that this type of testing was used more often in the earlier years of research than it is now. In James Gruber and Lars Bjorn's study of the sexual harassment of female autoworkers, they spent an average of an hour and a half with each of the 138 women that they

interviewed for their research (Gruber 279). When they concluded that sexual propositioning was the most prevalent type of sexual harassment (28.1% of the 160 incidents reported), it was easier to accept these results than if they had just sent out a survey to the same number of female autoworkers (Gruber 282-283). In-person research would also allow for the observance of nonverbal messages. In addition to what men and women are verbally saying, what are they physically communicating? How does this effect the total communication package? This is an example of a topic that needs to be researched in an actual work setting.

My third recommendation is that the field becomes more narrowly focused like it was in its early stages. It would be better if a single concept were tested across different types of occupations. Gender similarities or differences that surface in one profession may not necessarily be present in another profession. Carolyn Rozier of Texas Woman's University found a perfect example of this in a 1996 study on management skills. Her research compared the management styles of male nurse executives and female nurse executives. One of the significant characteristics of this study is that nursing is a female-dominated profession. Many studies done on differences in management skills have focused on the adaptation of females to male-dominated

professions, and this study reverses that idea. The results found that the attributes of male and female nurse executives were so similar that it seems the male executives have adopted the female-dominated leadership styles found in the nursing profession (Rozier 37). Based upon these results, the conclusion might be drawn that males in all female-dominated professions will adopt the traits of the females in the female-dominate profession. Is this just true in health care professions? Also, studies need to be done to see if females act similarly to their male counterparts in male-dominated professions. Is this universally true or only true in certain occupations or act certain job levels? This is why the results of one study need to be tested in other professions and work settings.

A final item to consider is how the media is effecting the research that is being done. The vast publicity that sexual harassment has received has caused some problems. As discussed previously, Bob Filipczak's study has found that gender communication in the workplace has been negatively effected by the ongoing campaign against sexual harassment. He feels that this has decreased the chances of understanding the differences in male and female communication styles. This has the potential for some negative long-term effects. The publicity of the mass media



may continue to delay progress in this field of study. If males and females continue to become more self-conscious and wary around the opposite sex, communication in the workplace may never be advanced.

However, Filipczak and others do offer a solution: education. This is another way the study of gender differences can change and advance. Instead of trying to isolate specific differences, it would make for a good area of study to have researchers test what, if any difference communication education would have in the workplace. If it were successful, it might be the answer to the problems in this field of study. Companies might incorporate gender training in with their already established job training programs. It would be interesting to see if this idea would work. Conflict resolution, which was covered earlier, could also be put into this category. It may be that the tools for overcoming gender differences are already out there, it is now time for companies to decide that they are ready to address and remedy the problem.

### **Conclusion**

The study of gender differences in the workplace has caught on and spread like wildfire during its relatively short history. It has developed into an interesting,

important, provocative, and timely field of study. In this study, it has been found that there are various similarities and differences that surface as the field has aged, and some problems were also addressed. Recommendations for how research in the future might be more effective were given. As long as research continues, progress is going to be made. Eventually, the research might be able to be tied together to draw some specific conclusions about the genders. In the end, we might actually find that we are not really that different. On the other hand, we may find some real differences. Either way, the knowledge will help men and women come together in the workplace and make our workforce stronger.

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